



Darkhouse spear fishing often involves much watching and waiting. When a pike comes calling (inset), however, the excitement level elevates. Seeing a fish approach the bait – in this case a decoy – is a bonus not usually available with hook-and-line ice fishing.

DARKHOUSE SPEAR FISHING: ONE YEAR LATER

By Greg Power

On December 1, 2001 a new outdoor activity, darkhouse spear fishing, was allowed on approximately 30 lakes scattered across North Dakota. Darkhouse spear fishing has been legal for a long time in a number of northern states.

Darkhouse spear fishing is an activity that you tend to either love or hate and patience is a must. A stereotypical snapshot of a "spearer" would portray an individual sitting in a small, dark fish house (the "darkhouse" is necessary to block out light so fish can be seen) on the ice, spear in hand, and fish decoy in the water. Long periods of time, sometimes hours, go by without action. Suddenly, a northern pike slowly comes within range and with a quick stab, the spearer will gauge his or her success.

Because darkhouse spear fishing is new to North Dakota, all spearers are required to register on the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's web site, or they can contact local Game and Fish offices. Registration allows the Department to monitor success and gather information that will help determine which lakes can sustain and handle additional pike harvest.

Current darkhouse spearing lakes were selected based on their ability to support increased pike harvest. In general, except in southwestern North Dakota, the 30 lakes were spaced so people would have opportunities to darkhouse spear fish without driving hundreds of miles.

Some Statistics

Of 1,255 individuals who registered last winter, just over 900 actually participated and spent 3,861 days spear fishing. Spearers were generally successful, averaging slightly more than 1 1/2 pike per day, with an estimated 6,025 pike taken.

The average weight of a speared pike was seven pounds and we estimate that perhaps 10-15 pike of greater than 20 pounds were taken. The largest pike speared was a 25 pounder from Lake Sakakawea.

Eleven lakes accounted for 98 percent of the pike harvest, as many other lakes had water clarity problems that limited participation and harvest. The top five lakes for spearing success were: Spiritwood (Stutsman County) 1,756; Buffalo (Sargent County) 1,257; Rice (Emmons County) 580; Sakakawea, 454; and Devils Lake, 352. Few spearers targeted nongame fish such as carp or buffalo, which along with pike, are the only legal species that can be harvested.

Ninety-eight percent of those who participated in darkhouse spear fishing were North Dakotans. Darkhouse spear fishing is allowed for nonresidents if their state provides the same privileges for residents of North Dakota. One-third of all spearers lived in Bismarck, Fargo, Jamestown, Minot or Devils Lake.

Silver Lake in Benson County has been added to the list of open lakes for this upcoming darkhouse spear fishing season.

In addition, even though 90 percent of the spearers reported they had marked their holes this past winter, beginning this upcoming winter it will be mandatory. Marking of holes is required for safety reasons and natural objects such as tree branches or a bundle of tumbleweeds (frozen into the ice) must be used (not cement blocks, tires, etc).

Ralph Rudolph, Wimbledon, speared this seven-pound pike at Spiritwood Lake last January.



SPEARFISHING IN DEVILS LAKE, 1885

From the pen of O.T. Tofsrud in his book entitled "A Story of Pierce County" published in 1936 comes this excerpt about fishing in Devils Lake:

This is a true story of what happened on the ice of Devils Lake in the winter of 1885, a few years after the first settlers had taken up abode around the beautiful sheet of water called Minnewaukon, or Devils Lake. The Great Northern Railroad had entered the community two years earlier, in 1883. Until this time the pioneers had paid little attention to such a trifling thing as fishing and probably most of them did not know that such immense numbers of the finny tribe were hiding in the rather salty water of this fine lake. They knew that fish were there, and usually caught them in one of four ways, by baited hook, traps, nets, or spears. But it was not until some genius advanced the scheme of spear-fishing the fish inside a building that real fishing commenced. Shanties were built all over the ice on the lake, and sheeted with tar paper. A lantern and a box provided the necessary apparatus, a spear was the most important apparatus, the box was used for a seat. A hole was cut through the ice, and as soon as an opening was prepared and the fish seen the light, all that was necessary to do was to sit there and spear them by the hundreds through the opening of the ice. It is said there were more than fourteen hundred fishing shacks on the lake at one time in the winter of 1885 and the frozen fish were shipped out in box cars....

The excerpt was from O.T. Tofsrud's first book on Pierce County and is quoted along with other material in a document entitled DEVILS LAKE that was submitted to the Game and Fish Department by Fred F. Fleck of Rugby in February 1980. O.T. Tofsrud wrote a second book about Pierce County entitled "Fifty Years in Pierce County."

SPEAR FISHING QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q: Is there a size restriction for a hole while spear fishing from a darkhouse?

A: There are no size restrictions for the hole in the ice.

Q: What are the season dates for darkhouse spear fishing?

A: Darkhouse spear fishing is legal from December 1 through February 28 of each fishing year.

Q: Are all fish species legal for darkhouse spear fishing?

A: No. The only legal species are northern pike and nongame species, such as bullhead, buffalo and carp.

Q: While spear fishing from a darkhouse, does my spear count as one of my four poles?

A: Yes.

Q: While I am spear fishing from a darkhouse, can I fish with hook-and-line in the same hole?

A: No. In order to use hook and line the hole must be smaller than 12 inches in diameter.

Q: Does the fish I catch while spear fishing from a darkhouse count toward my daily limit with fish caught by hook and line, or are the limits separate?

A: The daily limit combines fish you spear with fish caught by hook and line.

Q: I am making my own spear. Is there a size restriction?

A: No.

Q: Are there size restrictions on a fish house?

A: Yes. Fish houses or darkhouses shall not cover an area of more than 144 square feet.

Q: Do all people, even those under age 16, have to register before going darkhouse spear fishing?

A: Yes. The Department is going to develop an address base for a survey to determine use and harvest.

Q: Where do I register for darkhouse spear fishing?

A: Registration is available at the Game and Fish website, discovernd.com/gnf, or any North Dakota Game and Fish Department office.

Q: Where should I write the registration number for my child who is under 16 years old?

A: Write your child's registration number on your fishing license.

Q: How close can my fish house be to another one?

A: Fish houses must be at least 50 feet away from each other.

Darkhouse spearing is allowed only in the following water bodies:

Devils Lake, Benson/Ramsey counties; Silver Lake, Benson County; Powers Lake, Burke County; Rice Lake, Emmons County; Juanita Lake, Foster County; Lake Etta/Alkaline Lake complex, Horsehead Lake, and Round Lake, Kidder County; Flood Lake, LaMoure County; Beaver Lake and West Napoleon Lake, Logan County; Buffalo Lodge Lake, McHenry County; Coldwater Lake and Dry/Goose Lake, McIntosh County; Cavanaugh Lake, Morrison Lake, and Sweetwater Lake, Ramsey County; Grass Lake, Richland/Sargent County; Carpenter Lake and School Section Lake, Rolette County; Buffalo Lake, Sargent County; Coal Mine Lake, Sheridan County; Mallard Marsh and Spiritwood Lake, Stutsman County; Lake Laretta, Nelson County; Cottonwood Lake, Williams County; Lake Sakakawea from Garrison Dam to Highway 85 bridge at Williston; and Lake Oahe from South Dakota border to Maclean Bottoms boat ramp.

For detailed regulations please consult the North Dakota Fishing Guide.

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